

WRITING HUMOUROUS SPEECHES

Writing a humorous speech can be a significant challenge. Trying to 'be funny' may be very trying to the audience. No doubt an endless stream of belly laughs can be achieved by some, but a speech which incorporates some gentle humour to make a point may be just as powerful. The following guidelines are intended to help the speaker to develop humour.

Do

- Note situations in your own life which cause amusement, and use them as a starting point to develop a speech.
- Note situations which seem absurd or even frustrating, as these too can be funny in hindsight. For example when trying to phone a helpline, how many of us have had to wait for a real person to answer whilst pressing 1, 2 or 3 to access the various options, and still be reminded that 'your call is important to us'? There is rich material to be found in all situations when we have little control over events, such as when talking about self-assembly furniture, luggage carousels and waiting rooms.
- Rehearse timing of each line. Witticisms are enhanced if the audience can hear every word.
- Build in pauses to allow the audience to laugh.
- Get the audience on your side. Rhetorical questions are helpful. For example: "Have you ever...?" or "We have all...haven't we?"
- Keep the subject matter light. There is a funny side to virtually every situation, but it is easy to upset an audience member who doesn't appreciate the apparent humour.
- Respect your audience by avoiding overt mockery of a group of people. Even if there are no train spotters in the audience, they may be related to one.
- Be gentle. If an absurdity is over-emphasised it can be perceived as aggression. Some self-parody can help in this respect.
- Incorporate gestures. A wry grin, a look of bewilderment/surprise, a deadpan look can all amuse without having to say anything.
- Use the voice to highlight the humour, amending the volume and pitch where appropriate.
- Repeat words for emphasis. For example: "Not in my house they're not"
- Create word pictures for your audience (and allow them to develop), as these can be even more amusing to the listener than the speaker intended. For example: "For the camping trip, our family left behind the perfectly warm comfortable house, with all its modern conveniences. In a car groaning under the weight of gas cookers, battery torches, and inflatable beds, the aim was to try and recreate all those modern conveniences...in a field."

- Vary sentence length. For example: “We gathered at the window, peering at the leaden skies in eager anticipation of the incessant rain to stop. It didn’t”.
- Be prepared to amend your speech. If some of your material has not been received as well as you hoped, ploughing on in the same vein will not help.
- Be true to your own style of delivery. If you are normally measured in your delivery, a sudden conversion to wild animation will smack of desperation.
- Be prepared to axe a favourite joke if it doesn’t fit with the rest of the speech.

Don't

- Don't repeat a funny line or joke. If it went down well first time, it will look wooden if you repeat it.
- Don't use the 'isms'. 1970's comedians may have sustained a career out of ageism/sexism/racism, but these are not appropriate today. What amuses the speaker could cause acute embarrassment and discomfort to the audience.
- Don't swear or use 'blue' humour.
- Don't wait if a laugh isn't forthcoming. That pause which you carefully planned may not be needed.
- Don't telegraph an obvious punchline to the audience. You may be greeted with more groans than laughs.